

ACTION AID-00

RELEASED IN FULL

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	DODE-00	WHA-00
	SRPP-00	DS-00	EAP-00	EB-00	OIGO-00	UTED-00	H-00
	TEDE-00	INR-00	LAB-01	AC-00	DCP-01	NSAE-00	NSCE-00
	EPAU-00	PA-00	PER-00	ACE-00	TEST-00	USIE-00	R-00
	EPAE-00	IIP-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00

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R 091456Z FEB 04
 FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
 TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4843
 INFO AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
 AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
 AMEMBASSY LIMA
 AMEMBASSY QUITO
 AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO
 USCINCSO MIAMI FL
 USINT HAVANA

UNCLAS CARACAS 000425

NSC FOR TSHANNON
 USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD
 USAID DCHA/OTI FOR RPORTER

E.O. 12958: N/A
 TAGS: PHUM, PGOV, PREL, VE
 SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY FOR VENEZUELA

REF: A) STATE 11875 B) 2003 STATE 333935

 POLITICAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS LANDSCAPE

1. Venezuela continued to be embroiled in a political crisis over the government of President Hugo Chavez, who was elected in July 2000 in generally free and fair elections. The democratic environment suffered from deteriorating rule of law and weakened institutions that were increasingly subordinated to political interests. Respect for political rights continued to be of special concern as opposition groups petitioned the National Electoral Commission (CNE) to convoke a recall referendum on President Chavez' rule. The Government's human rights record remained poor. Political violence and intimidation against opposition political parties, the media, labor groups, the courts, the Catholic Church, and human rights groups was common, often carried out

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by government sympathizers inspired by the rhetoric of the President and other government officials. The police and military continued to commit numerous abuses, including extra-judicial killings of criminal suspects. Arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture of detainees persisted. Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening. Impunity, one of the country's most severe human rights problems, allowed corruption and extreme inefficiency to flourish in the judicial system. Child labor increased as economic conditions worsened, and violence against women and children remained problems.

----- OUR 2003 STRATEGY -----

2. The embassy focused its 2003 democracy and human rights efforts on support for political rights, while it continued conducting programs to fight other human rights abuses. The Ambassador and every section/agency used contact and representational work to encourage the implementation of OAS Resolution 833 which calls for a constitutional, democratic, peaceful, and electoral solution to the country's political crisis. In addition, embassy programs worked to strengthen Venezuelan institutions, encourage communication and dialogue, and oppose violence and extra-constitutional changes in government. The embassy conducted programs that can influence human rights practices through a variety of sections including the Public Affairs (PAS), Political, and Consular Sections, the Legal Attache Office (LEGATT), and the OTI office of the Agency for International Development (USAID).

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3. To increase professionalism and lower the likelihood of extra-judicial killings and torture committed by the security forces, LEGATT, in conjunction with PAS and the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS), arranged several training programs for law enforcement officials that incorporated rule of law and human rights concepts. During the second half of 2003, LEGATT sent six Venezuelan officers to a 10-day seminar in the US on counter-terrorism; one officer to a three-month leadership course at the FBI Academy; and three officers each to the FBI's terrorism and police management training and "Latin American Law Enforcement Executive Development Seminar," respectively. LEGATT also organized a two-week course on terrorism crime scene investigations for 50

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participants and a one-week anti-kidnap seminar for 40 participants.

4. In compliance with the Leahy Amendment, the Political and Economic Sections, DAO and LEGATT worked to vet military units and law enforcement personnel for training and assistance to ensure that the beneficiaries of US assistance have not committed human rights abuses. The Political Section's human rights officer also meets regularly with contacts in the private sector and within the government to foster support for human rights and track significant areas of concern.

5. The mission's efforts to promote democracy, rule of law, and political rights continued to be quite strong. The

USAID/OTI office funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) activities to promote transparency in the electoral process through domestic observation. To accomplish this objective, NDI is working with a consortium of civil society groups spanning the political spectrum to provide quality control in the electoral process, including administrative procedures and media reporting. The OTI also funded the International Republican Institute (IRI) to provide training to political parties in 1) execution of electoral campaigns with emphasis on developing campaign strategies and communicating party platforms effectively to voters; and 2) observation of electoral processes, focused on assessment, reporting, and establishment of a volunteer trainer network. In addition, the OTI funded the Carter Center's continuing mediation and electoral process observation efforts.

6. Complementing OTI activities, the mission ensured that all press statements and speeches by the Ambassador, the DCM, and visiting USG officials, including Members of Congress, contained references to our strong support for OAS Resolution 833 as the way out of Venezuela's political crisis. In addition, post ensured wide distribution of relevant remarks by Washington policymakers and OAS officials to the media and placed them on the embassy website. The mission also arranged a digital video conference (DVC) on the California gubernatorial referendum, during which the Venezuela referendum was discussed in detail.

7. To improve the country's judicial system, the Public Affairs Section (PAS) conducted several programs to strengthen the administration of justice and prevent abuses. PAS organized a DVC on judicial ethics and sponsored five expert speakers on various aspects of the administration of justice. PAS also sponsored a one-week workshop on

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"Mediation and Conflict Resolution in Prisons" conducted by an expert trainer in conflict resolution. The participants, representing all sectors of the judicial and penal systems, used their workshop experience to create a network for continuing professional collaboration. In late 2003, PAS arranged an additional expert speaker on victim protection and funded an International Visitor Program on "Human Rights and Prison Reform." A DVC on the country's human rights situation is planned for early 2004.

8. To strengthen civil society and democratic institutions, the mission approved \$718,500 of USAID/OTI funding for 14 grants in the following program areas: justice/human rights, transparency in government, media/freedom of expression, conflict management, and community impact activities (dialogue among polarized groups). For example, one project was designed to raise public awareness of and respect for human rights. It accomplished the goal by conducting human rights workshops for leaders of key societal sectors and by distributing written explanations nationwide of the main national and international mechanisms for protection of human rights. Another grant promoted democratic discussion between government and opposition parties in the National Assembly on topics such as freedom of expression. The discussions were facilitated by an international expert.

9. Especially relevant due to the standoff between the government and private media were embassy efforts to support a free and democratic press. The Ambassador hosted a Press Freedom Day event to highlight the importance of free speech. That message was backed up by USAID/OTI grants that emphasized the importance of an impartial media, allowing all candidates to have air time during elections, media regulatory systems, and the need to allow for democratic coexistence among those with opposing viewpoints. In conjunction with OTI, PAS arranged a DVC on the role of the media in a democracy for pro-government and opposition affiliated journalists. The mission issued many press statements in support of freedom of expression and against the use of violence by any party for political ends.

10. To assist women's efforts to overcome discrimination and violence, the mission co-sponsored with Vital Voices Global Partnership a kickoff workshop for women who are business and community leaders. The Vital Voices worldwide network helps women organize themselves to address a range of issues, including leadership training, coalition building, and the fight against trafficking in women and children. The mission also co-sponsored a one-day conference on proposed changes to the Domestic Violence Law that would reduce protective

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measures available to battered women and children. Conference participants produced a written argument (amicus brief) against the proposed change and presented it to the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court.

11. The Consular Section works with local immigration offices to strengthen immigration controls and prevent human smuggling and trafficking in persons. In 2003, the section hosted one DHS Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services officer who trained 300 employees from airlines, airport security, and the immigration/passport agency in fraud detection.

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